

SYRIA: THE NEW STORM CENTER

Test Case for Arab Nationalism

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DESPITE recent alarms in Moscow, we are no longer, it seems, quite so sure that there really has been a revolution in Syria. Judging from recent statements made in Washington, by and on behalf of Mr. Dulles, there may have been no more than a temporary shift in the balance of power between conflicting groups of politicians (in and out of uniform), rather than a dramatic conquest of the country by "international Communism." However that may be, the subsequent upheaval did enable the public to catch a glimpse of forces normally concealed from view—forces very inadequately described by the generic term "Arab nationalism." It may not be altogether useless to take a long look at them, for we shall meet them again, sometimes under different names, in the troubled years to come.

But first a brief recapitulation of some of the more notorious facts. The crisis—if there was one—developed last August, but by July it was already common knowledge that the Syrian Defense Minister, Khaled el Azm, was planning a visit to Moscow, in order to conclude a politico-military treaty; and long before that date it had become obvious that the Syrian government was moving from

"positive neutralism" toward something more closely attuned to Soviet requirements. The almost complete silence of the semi-controlled press about the events in Hungary last year was a sign that "Arab nationalism," in its Syrian variant anyhow, had opted for Moscow in the current power game. The drift had in fact begun as early as 1955, when Colonel Nasser in Cairo was still trying to preserve a more or less neutralist stance. It was of course accelerated by the Suez crisis, and by the time Khaled el Azm was on his way to Moscow, there was no longer any doubt that Damascus had decided to brave Mr. Dulles's wrath. In a sense, both the Russians and the Syrians have a case when they speak of the "Western hullabaloo" aroused by the Moscow agreement. It was, after all, not their fault that Western observers had for so long ignored the drift toward what has now become a first-rate international issue.

From the Western point of view, there was indeed a subsidiary cause of surprise and irritation, in that the Moscow deal showed the Syrian government to be less disunited than had been supposed. Western attention had hitherto focused on Colonel Serraj, the head of the army's political department and a prominent "National Socialist"; but the initiative in concluding the arms deal with Moscow was taken by Khaled el Azm, one of the country's largest landowners and a close collaborator with the French during the pre-war period. That a man of his standing should take the lead in converting Syria into a Soviet satellite seemed to contradict all the most plausible notions about the class character of politics—notions, it may be added, which are much more unthinkingly and dogmatically held in Washington than in Moscow.

EVEN before Khrushchev accused the United States of trying to push Turkey into war with Syria and thereby endangering the peace of the world, Syria's acceptance of Soviet arms and economic aid had revived the argument around the relation of Arab nationalism to Soviet Communism. Some aspects of this question are here examined by WALTER Z. LAQUEUR, author of *Nationalism and Communism in the Middle East* (1956). Mr. Laqueur will be familiar to readers of COMMENTARY. His last contribution, entitled "Israel and the Arab Blocs," appeared in our September issue.

The actual terms of the agreement are open to differing interpretations. The Damascus daily *Al Rai al Am* reported on August 1, 1957 that the Syrian mission to Moscow had obtained military and economic credits worth about \$400 million, against promises of repayment amounting to only a fraction of this sum; presumably the Russians had scaled down the price of military hardware (as was done in the so-called Czech arms deal with Egypt in September 1955); but the same generosity, or something like it, was claimed to have been displayed by the Soviet negotiators with regard to deliveries of machinery for the benefit of Syria's industrialization plan. If true, this suggested a degree of liberality which Moscow had not previously displayed in its relations with any of the East European countries. Clearly, Syria was regarded as a good investment.

By August 12, these disclosures, and the somewhat heated reaction in the Western capitals, had led to a further step toward the severance of Syrian relations with the West, when the Damascus authorities opportunely discovered the existence of a conspiracy to overthrow the regime by force. Its authors were said to be dissident army officers in touch with the United States Legation, three of whose officials were thereupon expelled at short notice (a step which led the State Department to declare the Syrian ambassador to Washington *persona non grata*). This was followed by a purge of army officers, including the then Chief of Staff, Tewfik Nazimudin, his place being taken by Afif Bizri, widely believed in the Levant to be a card-carrying Communist. (Bizri's denials of this charge have lacked conviction. On one occasion he went so far as to indicate that one could hardly be a good patriot without being suspected of Communism.)

While these dramatic events were taking place, President Shukri al Kuwatli and the Prime Minister, Sabri al Assali, busied themselves with assurances to Western and Arab interlocutors that nothing had really changed and that Syria wished to remain a neutral

country, as well as a member in good standing of the Arab League. These statements were at first received with an open display of skepticism, but Cairo's subsequent rallying to the Syrian cause had the effect of frightening those Western diplomats who at the outset counseled a tough attitude toward Damascus. It has become obvious that Pan-Arab solidarity can be invoked even by a regime which is more or less in the Soviet camp. Characteristically, the Jordan government was among the loudest to proclaim that there was no danger of Syrian intervention in Jordanian affairs and that Israel remained the real enemy. This is nonsense, but it is the kind of nonsense that Arabs like to hear. Nor are they visibly distressed when the Kremlin offers to rescue them from another kind of peril, this time said to be threatening them from Turkey.

II

ON ANY realistic assessment of what took place in Damascus last August, it must be conceded that there was nothing like a *coup d'état*. What happened was that the ruling bloc of army officers, Pan-Arab politicians, and their Communist allies, strengthened their joint hold on the country by removing some of the less reliable elements. The latter may be described as leftovers from the period when Syria was under French control and when the leading nationalist politicians represented the class of wealthy landowners and merchants. Neither of the two conservative parties, the "National Bloc" and the "People's Party," made much headway after 1945 in attracting the younger elements of the middle class, and by 1949 a series of military *coups* gave evidence that parliamentary rule had disintegrated. Although formally restored in 1954, parliamentary government has in fact proved no more than a superficial check on the combined activity of street mobs, army cliques and the mole-like burrowing of the Communists and their allies. As matters stand at the moment, it is a combination of Pan-Arab army officers, "National Socialists," and Communists, which has effectively won

control of the government and the administration by utilizing or intimidating some of the old-guard politicians who have grown defeatist under the impact of continued challenges to their traditional authority. Internal tensions and disputes within the radical coalition notwithstanding, Syria may now be said to have a kind of "popular front."

The most interesting, and at present probably the most important, of these radical groups is the Arab Socialist Renaissance party (Ba'th). In view of its close contacts with the army command and its connections with similar groups in other Arab countries, the emergence of the Ba'th is of more than local significance. It came into being as a result of the merger, in September 1953, of two separate factions: the Arab Renaissance party and the Arab (or Republican) Socialist party. The history of both groups goes back to the early 40's; they were then pro-Fascist in ideology, in organizational structure, and in their foreign political orientation. (Some of today's leaders of the Ba'th took part in the abortive pro-Axis revolt in Baghdad in 1941.)

The Renaissance group was originally headed by Michel Aflaq (a leading member of the Syrian Communist party up to 1943) and Salah Bitar, at present Foreign Minister; it relied chiefly on small groups of young intellectuals in Damascus and Deir az Zur. After the defeat of the Axis powers it stood for neutralism in world politics and a "socialist" program at home. Demands for equality for women and the disestablishment of Islam brought the group into sharp conflict with conservative elements, and it never attained much importance; in the 1949 elections only one of its members won a seat. The party executive thereupon decided to act as an educational organization for the propagation of advanced doctrines, rather than as a political movement. Subsequently, this faction collaborated on occasion with the "feudal" government to which, in theory, it was unalterably opposed. Aflaq served as Minister of Education in 1949 and undertook, possibly under some pressure, to collaborate with the military dictators of the

1949-54 period, Colonels Husne Za'im and Shishakli. On the whole, however, the policy of this group was based more on principles and less on expediency than was that of the other faction which joined with it to constitute the present-day Ba'th.

AQAM HAURANI, the head of the Arab Socialists (or Republicans) is a different, and even by Levantine standards a remarkable, political character. A brilliant speaker with a dynamic personality, his political career has been distinguished by the most determined efforts to gain power through whatever means, and by a willingness to ally himself with all and sundry. In the late 30's and early 40's he stood for an orientation toward Germany, Britain, and the United States (in that order), and his domestic alliances were similarly checkered. The most recent phase in his career began in 1949/50, when he organized a group of young intellectuals in Hama and Homs under an "anti-feudalist" banner, and sought to gain influence in the army and in the peasant movement in northern Syria. This group also organized small detachments of storm-troopers which frequently came into collision with members of the older parties and the feudal clans. Its program held promises of everything to everybody: the party was to be "nationalist-socialist-popular-progressive," standing for reforms in all walks of life, higher living standards, lower taxes, destruction of feudalism, nationalization of physical resources, and a republican-parliamentary regime. This did not, however, prevent Haurani from collaborating with Colonel Shishakli's military dictatorship in the early 50's, when for a time he became Minister of Defense.

After the restoration of the parliamentary regime in 1954, the united Ba'th party remained at first in opposition. Within the party Haurani, with his extreme nationalist slogans, gained the upper hand over Aflaq, who put the main emphasis on social reforms. Haurani, with less experience than Aflaq who had at one time been a leading Communist, also stood for close cooperation

with the Communists, while Aflaq had some misgivings on this score. While in opposition the party consolidated its influence among the urban intelligentsia, and especially among the students and army officers, who were dissatisfied with the incompetence of the traditional ruling parties. It made considerable headway in the September 1954 elections, when sixteen of its members were returned, and it won most by-elections between 1955 and 1957. Well-wishers of the party among the army command presumably had some part in this success; there is reason to believe that the election campaigns were at least partly financed from unspecified army funds.

With Arab unity high on its program, Ba'th gradually became the most anti-Western group in Syria, outstripping temporarily even the local Communists who were somewhat handicapped by Moscow's "peaceful co-existence" strategy. In its Pan-Arab nationalism it tried to be second to none, even attacking Colonel Nasser for compromising with the British over Suez in 1954/55. Shortly after the elections the party agreed to enter a coalition government, obtained several key positions (including the ministries of foreign affairs and national economy), and gradually came to dominate Syrian politics, largely as a result of its alliance with the army command which, after a temporary withdrawal, again took a decisive part in shaping the country's destiny.

The army has intervened at times in other countries, when political institutions have broken down or become discredited, and ambitious young political soldiers have taken over with or without invitation. In Syria, as in other Arab countries, the officer corps has shown a passionate interest in politics, although until comparatively recently it has not really been united in purpose. It was only as a result of several purges and subsequent reshuffles in 1957 that the group headed by Ba'th members and sympathizers (including presumably some Communists) prevailed over other trends. Their political convictions were and are radical; they want changes in Syrian politics, and in the Arab

world as a whole, in accordance with the lead given by Colonel Nasser, the Ba'th, and the Communists. This radicalism is admittedly in many cases of a vague character, and their foreign political orientation has less to do with Marxism-Leninism (or any other ideology) than with a general feeling that these are dynamic, purposeful movements which somehow "get things done." Back in the 30's the same officers would almost certainly have become pro-Fascist (as the older ones among them indeed were). Their anti-Westernism has similar roots. The Soviet Union seems to be riding the wave of the future, whereas the decadent West stands for the status quo and has been allied with old and discredited forces in Iraq, Jordan, and other Arab countries which these officers want to overthrow.

THE Syrian Communists, the other element in this coalition, emerged from illegality in 1954 as a small but extremely active and well-organized group, with undoubtedly the best leadership of any Communist party in the Middle East. They have put much stress on their patriotic convictions, and their leader, Khaled Bakdash, has in effect declared more than once that his party was radical-nationalist rather than Communist: "Syria is Arab nationalist, not Communist, and will remain so," he stated in parliament. The party has been at great pains to drop all the more radical planks in its program, including its agrarian demands; it has followed a national front line, and on occasion has even censured its Ba'th allies for their excessive intransigence toward conservative and orthodox Moslem groups (which is perhaps unwarranted, since the Ba'th eventually discarded its agrarian program too). It has hitherto worked mainly through "front" organizations such as the League of Arab Writers, the Syrian Students' Union, and numerous other "progressive" leagues of women, lawyers, etc. Most important of all, it has gained control of all three trade union organizations in Syria; the third and largest fell into Communist hands early in 1957.

On occasion the party has shown that it can draw the largest crowds at meetings, but on the whole it has been content with gaining strength rather than demonstrating it. Confident that the tide is running in its favor and that any "separatist" activity could only antagonize other political forces and block Syria's road into the Soviet camp, it has been moderate and restrained in its policy. This has not prevented it from becoming the largest and best organized Communist party in the Middle East and one of the chief political forces in Syria. By the summer of 1957 it might perhaps have made a bid for power, but any such venture was quite obviously opposed to both Soviet and general Communist interests in the Middle East, since it would have acted as a deterrent on other Arab countries. It was, moreover, unnecessary, for a "gradualist" approach appeared much more promising; as a guide and mentor for the Ba'th, the fellow travelers in the traditional parties (such as Khaled al Azm), and especially the army command, the party moved closer to the center of the stage. With Moscow publicly committed to the defense of Syria against all comers, the Communist party now has a decisive role in shaping the course of events.

III

THE current argument over Syria is thus largely a question of semantics: if one thinks of Communism as it was in the 20's: a revolutionary movement, internationalist in outlook, militantly atheist, wholeheartedly promoting the class struggle, a party claiming to represent the industrial working class, it follows beyond any shadow of doubt that there is no Communism in Syria today. Nor is there any reason to believe that Communism in this sense will gain much influence in the Middle East during the foreseeable future.

All this is quite true, and quite misleading. If Syria is not Communist by the standards of the 1920's, neither is China, and doubts may arise even with regard to the Soviet Union. Communism is developing,

and not only on the tactical level. The idea that only the industrial proletariat can lead the revolution was abandoned by Asian Communism long ago. Generally speaking, the class struggle has been replaced by the cold war and anti-Westernism. Throughout Asia and the Middle East there is a trend toward a form of populism whose distinctive features are anti-capitalism and anti-colonialism.

The fact seems to be that a new form of "popular democracy" has developed in Syria (and may develop subsequently in other Arab and Asian countries), and in this sense Syrian non-Communists are thinking and acting like good "popular democrats" without knowing it, much as Molière's bourgeois talked prose without realizing it. The distinctive features of this attitude are an anti-Western and pro-Soviet orientation in foreign policy, aggressive nationalism, and the attempt to modernize and industrialize the countries in question through central planning. No need is felt to preach *radical* change: the existing social structure is anyhow disintegrating, and the industrial bourgeoisie is so much weaker than in the West that it is possible to forget about the class struggle.

How, it may then be asked, does the Syrian situation differ from Kemal Ataturk's collaboration with Moscow in the 20's? The answer is that there has been a radical change in the world balance of power, which has made Russia a much more formidable partner than thirty years ago. Moreover, Ankara's alliance with Moscow was strictly limited to the field of foreign relations: far from opening his country to Communist fellow travelers, Kemal brutally suppressed them. Whereas what distinguishes the Syrian situation is the fact that the alliance from above is complemented by Communist pressure from below.

In the face of this situation the standard Western argument now runs somewhat as follows: events in Syria (and elsewhere) are a manifestation of radical Arab nationalism, of its feeling of frustration and disappointment with the West; its alliance with

Russia has nothing to do with Communism. This assessment is based on the belief that Arab nationalism is a factor equal to Communism, a possible countervailing force. In actual fact Arab nationalism and Communism move on different levels and therefore do not clash. The central aim of Arab nationalism—some form of Arab federation or union—can be achieved in a Communist framework as well as in any other. For the rest, Arab nationalism has no social or political philosophy of its own which would necessarily bring it into opposition to the Communism of the late 50's.

STILL, it may be said, wherever Communism has prevailed so far, it was brought about by the Communist party. The Syrian landowners and merchants who, together with the Ba'th party, constitute the support of the fellow-traveling regime, may be fools but they are not Communists. Is it possible to envisage the advent of a "popular democracy"—even of a new style—without the Communists playing the main role? This is a question which for the time being must remain open. But experience suggests that a determined minority with a clear program may well have a decisive influence on the course of events, provided the majority consists of people who do not really know what they want or where they are going. The present trend toward a new form of "popular democracy" need not be irreversible. It must depend largely on the overall balance of power in the world two or three years hence. Full Soviet control in Damascus is unlikely for various reasons, but there should be no illusions as to its possibility.

What needs to be said is that if there is a cultural difference between Moscow's satellites in Eastern Europe and countries like Syria (and to a lesser degree Egypt) it works in Moscow's favor. Communism in Eastern Europe has little if any popular attraction, as events in Hungary and Poland have shown. The Eastern European countries resent Soviet domination, regard Soviet Communism as a reactionary system, are not anti-Western in outlook, and want to "re-

turn" to Europe. There can be no doubt how they would opt if the choice were open to them. They are most reluctant satellites, whereas a country like Syria is a voluntary and enthusiastic convert, something Moscow never found in Europe.

It thus becomes absurd to portray the Syrians as the unsuspecting victims of Russia. In actual fact Moscow moved into the Middle East with considerable delay, after explicit invitations had been extended by Cairo and Damascus. The angry Soviet denials of Western charges of "penetration" are in this sense technically correct: the Russians have come as guests, not as invaders. Again, President Eisenhower was badly advised when last September he warned "international Communism" not to push Syria into aggression against her neighbors. Syria needs no pushing. Soviet intervention has probably been in the reverse direction. The Kremlin for the present may well counsel moderation, if only because too much aggressiveness on Syria's part would antagonize other Middle Eastern countries.

A conflict between the two main groups of Arab countries—the Baghdad Pact group and the Cairo-Damascus Axis—does indeed seem inevitable in the long run; it may even flare up quite soon, for recent official assertions of harmony do not reflect genuine agreement on the governmental level. But it is equally true that both sides have a common interest in postponing the clash as long as possible: all Arab leaders know that they carry weight on the international scene only as long as they appear united.

In addition, there are the specific interests of each Arab country. The Syrian leaders have a vital stake in pretending that nothing has really changed, that Syria continues to stand for Arab nationalism, "positive neutralism," and nothing more. Colonel Nasser faces a similar dilemma: Syria is his only reliable ally in the Middle East—what could he possibly gain by dissociating himself from Damascus? For the unpopular governments in Amman and Baghdad, open conflict with the Damascus-

Cairo Axis would mean considerable trouble on the domestic front; why not try to evade it as long as possible? King Saud's position is equally precarious; he cannot really hope to hold out for very long against the superior appeal of Pan-Arab radicalism that has penetrated his country too. His pro-Westernism is a myth; an analysis of the votes cast in the UN shows that his representatives have more often supported Soviet than American proposals. He will retain American support as long as he collaborates with the oil companies. For the rest, it is obviously in his own best interest not to stray too far from the course taken by Cairo.

It is true that Nasser and the Syrian regime cannot simply co-exist with the other Arab leaders. They must try to gain the upper hand. Sooner or later there will be a clash, and they hope, not unreasonably, that by then public opinion throughout the Arab world will be so overwhelmingly in their favor that the rival group will have to give in to their demands—or abdicate. Meanwhile, however, the uneasy truce continues; poor compromises can be an effective basis of policy in the Middle East.

WESTERN, especially American, policy toward Syria was based during the first few weeks after the crisis on the assumption that the other Arab governments would see the light and dissociate themselves emphatically from the policy followed by the ruling group in Syria. These expectations were not fulfilled, for they were based on an exaggerated notion of the political intelligence available in capitals such as Baghdad, Riyadh, or Amman. King Saud's behavior has by now effectively deflated any such hopes. The decision to demand the recall of the Syrian ambassador from Washington did, however, have a beneficial effect. It caused the Syrians to reconsider their orig-

inal intention to stage a big anti-American show trial. In a similar way, the accusations of Communism, far from estranging anybody in Syria, compelled the ruling group in Damascus to reassert its independence (though in words only).

For the rest, the only reasonable Western policy toward Syria for the near future seems to be one of masterly inactivity, studied non-interference, and demonstrative indifference. For too long Syria has been regarded as a very important country, which obviously it is not. A policy of paying less attention to the Damascus turmoil may have a salutary effect. It might even help to restore saner views throughout the Arab world. Much of the trouble in the Middle East has been due to the fact that for two generations now the British, the Americans, Hitler, Mussolini, and the Kremlin have all told the Arab leaders how important they are. Can these leaders be blamed for acquiring a grossly inflated sense of self-importance? And Syria, in contrast to Saudia, is not even an oil producing country; nor does it, like Egypt, control an important international waterway.

A new sense of proportion seems to be called for. Western military intervention is excluded, and it is doubtful whether minor gestures of hostility can be effective; backward countries are not greatly impressed by an economic blockade. Friendliness, on the other hand, however sincere, is even less likely to yield a political harvest for the West. It is a psychological and political necessity for Syria's rulers to proclaim a state of danger, to point to an enemy—and Israel by itself is too small to fill that role. Pan-Arabism needs a gain in self-esteem even more than political concessions; how better assert its new-won power than by displaying a resolve to defy the West? The key to success in Syria, for the time being, is to do nothing.